



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Poverty and Social Inclusion:  
Stakeholder Event

20 November 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

### Poverty and Social Inclusion: Stakeholder Event

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#### **Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr William Irwin (Chairperson)  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Oliver McMullan

#### **In attendance:**

Mr Mark Allen	Northern Ireland Assembly
Mr Nicholas McCrickard	County Down Rural Community Network
Mr Barry Boyle	Fermanagh Rural Community Network
Ms Mary Conway	Omagh Forum for Rural Associations
Mr Aidan Campbell	Rural Community Network
Ms Teresa Canavan	Rural Development Council

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** Welcome back. I found the discussion interesting and useful. I was facilitating table 2, and the conversation was thought-provoking. I will ask MLAs representing each of the tables to give some feedback. Mark Allen, who is a researcher, will also give feedback from one of the tables. We will start with feedback from table 2, which was my table. I will ask Stella to do that because I might not be able to read some of her writing.

**The Committee Clerk:** I am reporting on table 2. We were discussing partnership working for the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme, particularly across Departments. Lots of examples were given of close partnership working. One example was DARD and the Public Health Agency with regard to the maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas programme (MARAs), the rural support networks and the farm family health checks. It was noted that the TRPSI programme is a new approach. It is flexible and is tailored to need, allowing stakeholders and people to decide what has to be done. It was not about being prescriptive, and, in many cases, it was about pump-priming. The example was given of DARD working with DRD on rural transport.

There was some worry expressed around the new councils and what impact that would have on the delivery of services, particularly around the emphasis on the urban and rural aspects, the urban and rural splits and the fact that new councils may not always have a rural focus. The example that was used was DSD, which does not work outside the 30 miles per hour zone. We would not like to see that kind of approach in the new councils.

Match funding and the leverage that the TRPSI programme has brought in were also discussed. One conservative estimate is that the TRPSI programme has leveraged in about £30 million. The social return on that investment has not been measured. So, we reckon that the social return on that investment would be a lot more.

What we are talking about here are very small amounts of money that allow match funding, particularly with European programmes, which can enable programmes that have massive impacts on people's lives. There is a clear role there for DARD not only as a funder but as a facilitator. We talked about the 50,000 to 60,000 people who have been involved in projects that TRPSI has delivered, often with major impacts and changes to their lives, and that TRPSI was about reaching individuals.

In terms of partnership working, some of the stakeholders and groups that are involved in delivery are now starting to try to work with Departments. One example was given of working with DETI and DARD on advisory groups. DARD, in the meantime, was doing interdepartmental work and having group meetings with other Departments. The changes on the ground and the work that has been done would not have been possible without that local presence, without the local stakeholder groups with their local knowledge, credibility and trust, and the momentum that they have generated over the lifetime of the programme. MARA was held up as an example of how the Public Health Agency could work with local stakeholders and tap into all that local presence, knowledge, credibility and trust.

A very different example was the borewell scheme, which was a small scheme that did not involve large sums of money. It affected small numbers of people but had major impacts on their lives. That was an example of good partnership working with one particular agency, which was DRD, in that case.

Concerns were expressed about Departments being focused on doing what they have to do and doing what they always did, that they are on a train track: they are doing their work with their heads down and not really looking up to take stock. Lessons on innovation, delivery and flexibility have come through very clearly from TRPSI, and it is about how Departments can tap into those. One example that was given was about looking to the change fund that is coming from DFP and encourages innovation and flexibility in approach. There could be something done around that and partnership working with other Departments.

The issue of the number of local groups and stakeholders that have been involved in this programme was mentioned. There was discussion about the large number of groups and whether there are too many people and groups involved. However, it was acknowledged that, in order to get that local delivery and impact on individuals, you need that local presence, local knowledge and the credibility, trust and momentum that have been built up. Perhaps there is something that could be done to strengthen that voice so that they have a greater influence at a regional level.

A couple of issues were raised at the very end of the discussion. The major one was about budgets and the concerns about what is coming down the line in the incoming year. Two things came out from that very clearly. One is that there needs to be very clear communication and engagement with stakeholders by DARD, particularly given the very tight timescales. We are looking at 29 December for a reply to the consultation on the 2015-16 Budget, and it will go to the Executive in the first week of January. There was also a very clear message to DARD to allow the stakeholders to try to have some say in how any reduction in funding is managed.

The second issue was about innovation and the change fund being managed by DFP. It was about how we can encourage other Departments to create a central pot that all people could draw from, as that would allow the flexibility of the TRPSI programme to continue and the learning to be implemented. The downside to that, which is clearly acknowledged, is that other Departments might see it as a way to hand all their rural responsibilities over to DARD.

**Mr McAleer:** At our table, we discussed rural proofing and why we need it. We discussed how, with many Departments, it is hit and miss in terms of policies being rural proofed. Departments tend not to consider it as policy until they are pulled up on it, at which stage they revisit it. We agreed that there is a need for a mechanism for Departments to be accountable. We rarely see reference to rural areas in consultation documents. Rural proofing needs to be considered at the start and not revisited.

Part of this should be about getting a proper definition of what "rural" means; that is important. Many people seem to think that it is everything outside of Belfast. We need to ensure proper targeting of rural deprivation and social isolation. It was also reported that the experience is that Government schemes tend to be driven by numbers and targets. This means that many bigger rural towns with higher populations are seen as quick wins to make up the numbers, which further isolates people who are out there in the countryside in rural areas.

Rural proofing this legislation would ensure that any policy, scheme or project coming from Departments has to link to proper implementation at a rural level. It would encourage Departments to take the MARA approach, and this received some positive comments. That would entail getting out

into the hard-to-reach areas, travelling up the long lanes and roads, and knocking on doors to find those who are most in need.

There is a real need for rural proofing — *[Laughter.]* Sorry, there is a need for responsibility for rural proofing to be not just with DARD but shared amongst all the other Departments. Rural proofing will help all the other Departments to take responsibility for relevant issues in rural areas.

It was also said that rural proofing should enable local communities to arrive at and provide solutions for themselves. Some of the most innovative people you could meet, when it comes to devising solutions to need in rural areas, can be found in those areas. DARD will also be looking at a review of TRPSI, and hopefully the issues we have raised today will fully inform ways to address the concerns.

A slight deviation from rural proofing in our discussion was the issue of how deprivation is measured. There is agreement that the mechanism that we use to measure deprivation does not fully reflect the extent of need and deprivation in rural areas, which is something that should be urgently looked at.

Hopefully, everybody else at table 1 agrees that we had a good discussion: it was full and frank, everyone had their say and it was useful. I have referred to the main issues that were raised during the discussion, and there will be an opportunity to raise any further points at the end of the meeting when there will be an open floor.

I thank you all very much for coming along this morning.

**Mr McMullan:** The issue being discussed at table 3 was what the priority should be in a successor programme. It was generally agreed that the current programme has been a success, given its wide remit. MARA has worked well and should be included again due to the groundwork it has covered and the information it has gathered. One of the reasons why it was successful was because it offered an end product. The borewell scheme did not cover all rural areas; it was very specific. However, it was successful, and it should be looked at again.

Rural support networks support vast numbers of rural dwellers, but DARD's programme has been the key to their success. The focus needs to be on the context of a new programme, and that strategy may change with the implementation of the community plans. New programmes need to get to the heart of rural issues, especially isolation. Despite council changes, DARD will still have a significant role to play in getting projects off the ground. Rural Support makes a community connection and is a link between councils and the community.

Rural transport is another area that we looked at. Whilst it is a valuable resource for the isolated and the vulnerable, the service needs to be maintained and revised to ensure equality. By equality, I mean ensuring that areas with rural transport have the same number of buses. There are some areas that have buses numbering double figures, yet the numbers of buses in other areas are only in single figures. That hurts the communities.

Partnership working is important. DARD working with the Public Health Agency is a good example of that. The warm homes scheme is very popular and there is a waiting list. Some rural homes have not been reached, including those that are hard to treat because they have stone walls or asbestos in the roofs. How can those people be helped?

New links across all Departments and items of the Budget was another suggestion.

There were concerns about the rural White Paper. It needs to work and be firmly in place. We asked this: "Is every Department working with the rural White Paper?" We do not think so; everybody has signed up to it, but not everybody is working with it. DARD's programme is successful because it allows an approach from the ground up, working with the people who know the issues.

Programmes for young people are hard to sell due to there being other providers. Consultancy involvement does not work, so local input is better. By that, we mean that, instead of giving money to consultants, it would be far better spent locally.

People from rural communities cannot travel to colleges to take up computer courses. DARD should look at this. We looked at the colleges. They can come and do outreach courses, and that is not being taken up.

We feel that the rural community networks should promote what they do and what they have done more. They are really doing a terrific job, but not many people out there know about the work that they do and what they have done. That is where we would like to see them promoting themselves more.

Community plans should have been compulsory and interlinked with the rural development programme. This would maximise the benefits for all the rural community. At the present time, the Minister has allowed the community plans to be voluntary and has not put an end date on them. They can be finished at any time. This, we feel, is wrong.

The uncertainty of budgets will affect the different programmes.

Deprivation is measured using the Noble indices, and that needs to change. Those indices actually work against quite a lot of rural dwellers, rather than working with them. In that sense, they all need to change. We need to look at that in a different way.

I thank our group for working well and Elaine for taking notes.

**Mr Mark Allen (Northern Ireland Assembly):** Table 4 looked at what really led to success. That was premised on the fact that TRPSI was a success, and there was consensus around the table that the many elements of the programme had indeed been very successful. There were particular reasons why that was the case.

Key things were fairly consistently put forward. The local knowledge dimension came through very strongly: the ability of local people to know who was in need in an area and to go out and reach people. What impact did a flyer maybe stuck in a library or a doctor's surgery have? Linked to that was the fact that the programme was very much concerned with identifying local need and the ability to tailor a response to local need. That flexibility was really critical to TRPSI, probably largely due to the fact that it is core DARD money. Maybe it was not coming with the stipulations or requirements of other funding sources, be it the EU or wherever.

Another critical factor was the fact that some of the programmes are trying to reach people who are maybe vulnerable, isolated and, effectively, not that trusting. The ability to engage them with a local face or someone who knew them could make a difference as to whether they proceeded to the programme.

I think it has been touched on by other people, but another core success and core principle was the cross-departmental approach. DARD was identified by people at our table as having taken the lead, but DARD really enabled other Departments to get involved through the programme, and they also opened the door for some of the groups and individuals involved to get access to other Departments and to showcase the sort of work they were doing. That has been a particular benefit. The instance of DSD was cited, and how DSD's involvement with DARD in the warm homes scheme had maybe begun, at a very rudimentary level, to change DSD's perception of what fuel poverty was in rural areas. I suppose that, through that cross-departmental working, there is an exposure to the reality of rural issues rather than the perception.

Another thing that was particularly strong was the fact that all the programmes were really drawing out people who were not currently involved. They were enabling them to get involved. People were able to use very good examples: Paddy used Glasgowbury and the music classes being provided. Paddy gave the very good examples of music tutoring, and what the actual cost would be. Through the involvement of TRPSI, that could be subsidised to a level that made it possible for far more parents and children to be involved. It is maybe just about recognising that the poverty in some instances is not just financial but societal, and the benefits of addressing isolation came through very strongly in many of the programmes.

Another strength that people touched upon was coordination across all the bodies. We were fortunate at our table in that we had an individual project, local bodies and regional. There was a sense that there was coordination but maybe a recognition that more could be done.

Another thing that I want to emphasise that came through very strongly at our table is the role of DARD staff through the programmes, the accessibility of DARD staff, the ability to talk to them and their ability to respond to the needs of communities. Equally, a number of people wanted to put on record the fact that there was ministerial support for the programme and how that support, even at Executive level, is critical.

Some of the other issues and concerns raised are looking to the future. One that has already been raised is the rural-proofing dimension. Are other Departments serious about it? What does it actually mean to other Departments? That is critical going forward to build on the success of TRPSI.

Another thing, which is particularly timely given the Budget consultation, is the concern around gaps in funding between programmes and transition. As we stand here, none of us knows what the impact of the Budget will be. There may well be some pain, and I suppose it is about how that is managed.

The other big factor is about how you measure success. Anecdotally and even at a very qualitative level, there is no difficulty showing the impact of the programme. The problem comes in scaling that up to compare it with other economic data that other Departments or even other elements within DARD are used to dealing with. That is not to say that it has not been a success, but it is about being able to prove that it has been a success.

That is it, unless anyone has anything that they want to add.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** I thank all the groups for their feedback. Before we finish, we are going to give everyone in the hall an opportunity to comment on any issues that they feel have not been covered. We have a roving mic. If you want to comment on something that you feel has not been covered, put your hand up.

**Ms Teresa Canavan (Rural Development Council):** I want to highlight a few comments in relation to rural proofing. We, as an organisation, feel that this will require a change in mindset as much as anything. It will require a range of measures, and obviously legislation is one part of that. From our perspective, there is an issue around the lack of a robust evidence base in relation to rural issues. We feel that there should also be support for looking at rural pathfinders or innovative service delivery solutions that do not just concentrate on the numbers but are more about effective delivery in rural areas.

TRPSI provided an opportunity to provide demonstrations, but it is important to ensure that other Departments do not become reliant on DARD to fulfil their rural responsibilities. There has been a lot of discussion about rural stakeholders and the value of rural expertise. If that rural expertise is valued, it has to be resourced. We want to feed that back into the process.

**Ms Mary Conway (Omagh Forum for Rural Associations):** One of the first things that I want to say is how glad we are — I hope that I speak for the majority of people here — that we have had the opportunity to meet members of the ARD Committee. All too often, we are working out in the community and providing valuable services, so it is excellent to be able to interact with the ARD Committee and DARD officials; we appreciate that.

Teresa already hit on it, but we talked about a premium for rural areas. We were looking at proofing. It is so important that extra time and extra support is given to deliver services in rural areas. It is also important to acknowledge the very innovative solutions that rural groups and rural people can come up with. If they notice gaps in services, the local community is often able to provide very innovative solutions. However, there are also areas that have very weak infrastructure and need hand-holding support, which is where the community development support contract that we are involved in comes in.

**Mr Nicholas McCrickard (County Down Rural Community Network):** I want to add to what Mary said about the work of the agents of DARD, if you like, on the ground, which is a huge benefit. When we were having a chat, Oliver asked an awkward question, and we had to think. It was about the number of local contacts that DARD has on the ground with people in real need. There are huge databases of people who have benefited from MARA, databases through the rural support networks like us, the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and other partners. So, if you need to get impact on the ground, DARD, probably uniquely among Departments, has a very direct route to those people. We are all involved in the formation of local action groups (LAGs) at the minute, so there are big numbers at those events on a nightly basis right across the country. We have the ability to do that, and TRPSI should get the credit for that.

I see TRPSI as being a continuum of the long-term support that DARD has given to rural dwellers, not just the agricultural community but the whole population in rural communities. When you think about it, you realise that DARD has been doing those sorts of interventions since the late 1980s. It has been

refined over the years, it is getting better and it is trying new things. They do not all work, but where they do work, they are very effective.

**Mr Aidan Campbell (Rural Community Network):** I want to pick up on a point that Nicholas made about future programmes. There is a lot of data on what MARA and other TRPSI programmes have achieved and, as a result of that data, there is a job of work to be done around identifying the trends, gaps and dynamics of poverty and deprivation in rural communities. Someone needs to take on the work to build the evidence base that Teresa talked about in terms of where you target any future programmes that the Department might bring out.

**Mr Barry Boyle (Fermanagh Rural Community Network):** When you are counting the money up, as well as all the work that we do in coordinating our local groups, recognition needs to be built in there somewhere of the number of voluntary hours that have been coordinated over the TRPSI programme, because those people are important and essential to the community. When economists are doing the figures, they should look not just at the salaries for the people who are involved in TRPSI but at the voluntary hours that have been brought in through the Department.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** OK. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you for your attendance and your input. I know that members have found it to be a very useful event. It will inform the rest of the review that we are conducting, and it will inform the whole Assembly when the Committee review is completed. We intend to hold a plenary debate on the issue in the new year, followed by recommendations to the Minister.

There is lunch for you all now, and I hope that you enjoy it. I wish you all a safe journey home. Thank you very much.